

God's Missionary



Leslie Newbigin is an important influence on many of today's theologians, missiologists, and Christian thinkers. For Wilbert Shenk, professor of missions at Fuller Theological Seminary, Leslie Newbigin is "an enduring figure . . . cutting-edge." To theologian George Hunsberger of the Center for Theological Inquiry, Newbigin "has few if any peers in this half of the twentieth century for laying the biblical and theological foundations for mission."

Who is Newbigin? The man does not fit any convenient category. A career missionary to India, his greatest impact has come in England and America since his retirement. He is a world-class theologian, yet he writes books without footnotes and never, until he retired, taught at a theological institution. Much of his career was spent within the orbit of the World Council of Churches, yet his greatest following is among evangelicals. CHRISTIANITY TODAY asked senior writer Tim Stafford to find out who Newbigin is, and why he matters.

At his retirement in 1974, following 35 years in India, Leslie Newbigin fulfilled a cherished dream by riding the bus home. Modestly famous as a bishop in the Church of South India and as a leader in the early World Council of Churches, Newbigin (with his wife, Helen, also in her sixties) was given a grand farewell in Madras before setting off on the overland route.

The pair carried only two suitcases and a rucksack. They planned to rough it.

Relatives thought they were sure to be killed. A friend in the Indian State Department wrote to embassies along the way, urging officials to shelter these important guests. Planes were therefore met in all the relevant cities—but no one thought to check the local buses.

Ascending the rugged Khyber Pass in

a torrential downpour, Newbigin overheard one of his fellow passengers: "You don't often see such elderly hippies on this route." Through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey, the Newbigins used local transport (hitchhiking when necessary), ate local food, and sought out local Christians. In only one place did they find no Christian fellowship: in Cappadocia, the once-great seat of Christian theology. Making their solitary Sunday worship in an ancient carved-rock church, the Newbigins took time to contemplate "the fact that a great living Church can be completely destroyed" (*Unfinished Agenda*).

It made a suitable introduction to the next phase of their lives. The Newbigins settled back home in Birmingham, England, where he would teach at the Selly Oak missionary training colleges. Though a popular teacher, Newbigin found disturbing signs at the colleges. When he talked about the gospel, he drew puzzled reactions. What exactly did he mean when he said, "the gospel"? He wrote to a number of seminaries to get their curriculum for his course on the theology of missions. Most, he learned, offered only the history of missions, or various Third World theologies. Newbigin was accustomed to the church in India, which took an optimistic, evangelistic stance despite its tiny size. The church in England, by contrast, seemed to hold no very strong understanding of its message or its missionary calling.

G. K. Chesterton begins *Orthodoxy* with his fancy of "an English yachtsman who slightly miscalculates his course and discovers England under the impression that it is a new island in the South Seas." That, says Chesterton, represents his own story of finding Christian faith in Christianized England.

to Us

TIM STAFFORD

When Lesslie Newbigin returned to the West after 35 years in India, he found his native England had become a foreign mission field.



PHOTOS BY DAVID KAMFNER

"What could be more delightful than to have in the same few minutes all the fascinating terrors of going abroad combined with all the humane security of coming home again?"

Lesslie Newbigin lived that story upside down. At the age of 65, he came home to England and found it foreign. Ministry in England, he discovered, "is much harder than anything I met in

India. There is a cold contempt for the Gospel which is harder to face than opposition. . . . England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church" (*Unfinished Agenda*).

From that rude confrontation with pagan England has come an outpouring

of books and lectures. Newbigin looked at the West with a missionary's eye and asked a missionary's analytic questions. How can we evangelize this culture, built on Christian foundations yet utterly unwilling to consider (almost unable to understand) the Christian's claim to know the truth that will set us free? It is hard, Newbigin knew, for a Hindu or a Muslim to come to worship Christ. For

“The statement that all dogma must be questioned is itself a dogma which must be questioned.” (*Truth to Tell*)

an Englishman, it would seem, it had become even harder.

A PAIN IN THE MIND

One day in 1979, a 70-year-old Lesslie Newbigin found himself substituting as chair of his denomination's (the United Reformed Church's) local council. On the docket was the demise of a 120-year-old slum church across from the gloomy walls of Winson Green prison, near Birmingham. The congregation was down to 20 members and must inevitably close up, but Newbigin could not reconcile himself to doing it. He is a small, polite but insistent man, whom his colleague Martin Conway calls “an indefatigable terrier” in pursuing his convictions. He told the council that “if the Church abandoned such areas in order to settle in the relatively easy circumstances of the suburbs it would forfeit the claim to be a missionary Church” (*Unfinished Agenda*). His insistence prevailed, but only when he agreed to take on the pastorate without pay.

Because many Asian families had settled in the Winson Green area, Newbigin convinced the church to invite Hakkim Singh Rahi, a young Indian pastor, to join him. Together they went door to door in the run-down neighborhood, and Newbigin got a ground-level introduction to how far from Christian his England had become. While Asian immigrants almost always welcomed him and Rahi in for tea, Anglo neighbors often slammed the door in their faces. When the two pastors did get inside, they found lives formed by the omnipresent television, not the Bible. Religion was seen as a matter of personal taste, a private concern about which no one should trouble another.

Even fellow Christians seemed to believe this. Newbigin and Rahi had some success at evangelizing Sikhs and Hindus, but other believers were unenthusiastic, some downright antagonistic. One clergyman informed Newbigin that missions was theological racism. To which Newbigin responded: beware of theological fornication.

As a parish minister he became involved in a debate about the teaching of

religion in Birmingham schools. England remains officially Christian, and religion continues to be taught in the classroom. But large numbers of Asian immigrants, Hindu and Muslim, required a pluralist rethinking of the subject. Controversy was inspired when Marxism was included as one of the possible “stances for living” to be taught. This did not trouble Newbigin, as he thought that Marxism was, indeed, a quasi-religious ideology. He was more disturbed that the proposed syllabus “assumed that religious education could be provided from a neutral position, as though the teacher was standing on a platform above all the rival claims to truth and in a position to survey them with magisterial impartiality.” Religious education seemed to assume that real truth lay in the teacher's scientific detachment from all religious claims.

In fact, the entire educational system assumed the same thing. “What struck me most were the complaints I heard from representatives of the minority faith communities—especially the Muslims. Their complaint was not at all against the teaching of Christianity. It was that the entire school curriculum, with its unstated but all-pervasive assumption that God was not a reality to be reckoned with in the teaching of truth, was corrupting their children. It was in vain that liberal-minded members of the Council pointed out that the section on Islam had been written by a reputed Muslim scholar. The very fact that Islam could be tucked away into one sub-section of a section of truth called ‘religion’ was intolerable” (*Unfinished Agenda*). And yet, he noted, most Christians found it quite tolerable for their faith to be similarly treated.

A more churchly involvement pushed Newbigin to put his concerns on paper. The British Council of Churches planned a national conference to discuss issues of church and society. Newbigin was included on the planning committee since he had a long history of interest in political and social issues. The approach taken distressed him, however. It seemed to consider a laundry list of issues—“the church and unemployment,” “Christianity and nuclear power”—and bring in

the Christian message as “a kind of doctor” to answer the questions posed by the age. He challenged the whole approach, dashing off a long appeal that was published (with an initial run of 500 copies) as *The Other Side of 1984: Questions to the Churches*. It called Western Christians to recognize that they lived in an alien culture and to develop a truly missionary approach.

“All thinking begins with a pain in the mind,” Newbigin says, and evidently his pain was shared by others. The pamphlet brought unusually strong and personal responses. Laypeople particularly found that lights snapped on in their minds. It was as though he had said to shivering people, “Of course you're cold. Haven't you noticed that the fire has gone out?”

The planned conference finally took place in 1992, eight years late. By then a movement of sorts had developed in what became known as the “gospel and our culture” program. An energetic band of academics, clergy, and thoughtful laity coalesced, discussing whether and how the West could be converted. A newsletter was launched. Asked to give Princeton Seminary's Warfield Lectures, Newbigin expanded his pamphlet into a small book, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, which spread Newbigin's ideas to America. More books would follow, elaborating the theme.

The movement continues today as a loosely organized, hand-to-mouth operation. What excites it, and binds it together, are the ideas that Newbigin advances even now at the age of 87.

PUTTING SCIENCE IN ITS PLACE

As a young man growing up in the north of England, Newbigin caught (from his father) a love of rock climbing. It is an avocation appealing to those who lack terror on the heights. Newbigin betrays a similar fearlessness in his approach to a post-Christian West. He will not begin, bowing and scraping in the traditional way, by commending Christianity as a reasonable faith. That, he thinks, would abandon the climb before the first pitch. Reasonable by whose standards? The gospel cannot be “proved,” he says, because that would presuppose a truth more fundamental than the gospel, by which the gospel can be proved. To him, the gospel story is the central and most fundamental of all truths. “The proper form of apologetics is the preaching of the gospel itself and the demonstration—which is not merely or primarily a matter of words—that it does provide the best foundation for a way of grasping and dealing with the mystery of our existence

in this universe" (*Proper Confidence*).

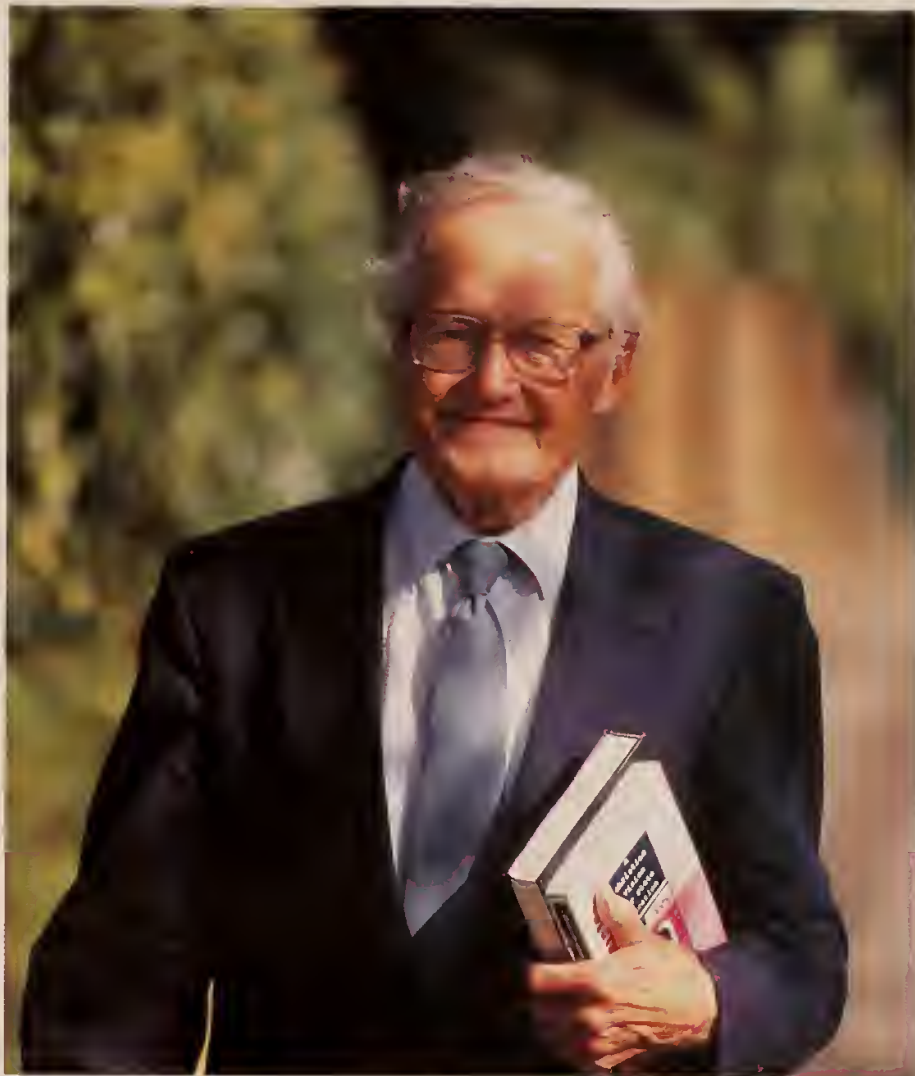
Unfortunately, the gospel is usually viewed today—as are all religious claims—as existing at the very margins of truth, where facts are not at stake, only personal values or preferences. This “map of truth,” with science at bedrock, the humanities a soft tangle of vegetation above it, and religion on high, as arbitrary as the weather, is precisely where Newbiggin attacks.

Newbiggin seeks to turn the map upside down, to set the gospel as the basis of truth. “As people who are part of modern Western culture,” he asks, “with its confidence in the validity of its scientific methods, how can we move from the place where we explain the gospel in terms of our modern scientific world-view to the place where we explain our modern scientific world-view from the point of view of the gospel?” (*Foolishness to the Greeks*).

Science has much to teach us, Newbiggin believes, but not the truth of relentless materialism and skepticism that is often suggested. With a major assist from scientist Michael Polanyi, Newbiggin tries to show that real science is hardly the mechanical truth machine commonly portrayed. For there is no science without the scientist, and neither the scientist nor his work can be understood in purely material or skeptical terms. By mere mechanical induction the scientist would get nowhere, would not even know what questions to ask. The search for knowledge requires the personal commitment of the scientist, using mental faculties that cannot be adequately described.

Science can, however, teach us its dogged faith that truth can be known and its courageous willingness to treat discoveries as public commodities, to be held—and challenged—in the arena. So with the gospel, Newbiggin says: if it is true at all, it must be true for all, not just for those who happen to believe in it for personal reasons.

And if the gospel is true, then it is quite big enough to contain the truths of science. (In fact, Newbiggin points out, it was within the truth of the gospel that Western science came to be.) Science, however, is not big enough to hold the gospel inside. Since philosopher Immanuel Kant, and particularly since theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, theologians have attempted to reconstruct Christianity to fit within a modern, “scientific” world-view. The results have been disastrous for Christian faith as well as for the modern world that tried to sustain itself on a reduced Christianity.



“The most important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order.” (*Truth to Tell*)

The real problem for Christianity is not science at all, Newbiggin thinks, but the “conversion of a culture,” which took place during the Enlightenment, a “shift in the location of reliable truth from the story told in the Bible to the eternal truths of reason, of which the mathematical physics of Newton offered the supreme model” (*Proper Confidence*). The “eternal truths of reason,” requiring no faith, doubting everything but what can be measured and proved, end in nihilism (as Nietzsche predicted, and as our age plainly demonstrates).

Newbiggin has lived long enough to witness an extraordinary loss of confidence in Western culture. When he

went to India in 1936, British civilizers, heirs of the Enlightenment, ruled with complete conviction that their culture—“civilization,” as they referred to it—held the answers for all people. Thus they spread education, science, law, medicine, government. Yet by the time he left India in 1974, Newbiggin often saw young Britishers “wandering in the streets as beggars dressed in unwashed Indian clothes,” seeking wisdom from the East. Confidence in “civilization” had all but vanished.

Science that tries to contain the whole world of truth has produced great material progress, Newbiggin notes, yet it offers no idea whatsoever what it is for. Such

“If total skepticism becomes the intellectual fashion of a whole society, then that society is quite certainly on the road to its demise.” (*Proper Confidence*)

science leaves people rich and powerful, but purposeless. In the end, this project must destroy even science. Only the Christian gospel, reclaimed as public truth, can sustain science (and life) within a proper understanding of the purpose of humankind.

THE INVASIVE GOSPEL

Newhigin is a brilliant thinker and writer, one of those pre-World War II Oxbridge products, like C. S. Lewis, who seem to know everything, and write about it with effortless erudition. The relationship between science and Christianity is central to his thought, but Newhigin's penetrating mind reaches out to many other profound topics. Any educated reader

must be impressed and stimulated.

Yet Newhigin's writings pack a distinctive punch, well beyond the pleasure of intellectual analysis. Reading Newhigin, one feels the invigorating possibility of getting outside what “everybody knows” and making a new beginning in free and truly Christian thought. His Jesus cannot begin to accommodate himself to modern thought; his Christianity will never fit into a private niche called “personal faith.” Newhigin offers exhilarating characteristics unfamiliar to the modern world, but actually quite antique. He writes and thinks like a missionary.

The prestige (and presence) of missionaries has greatly faded since World War II, especially among the educated,

so that a real missionary is nearly as strange a figure as the tribal people in old *National Geographics*. Yet missionary thinking can help correct any culture's tendency to become self-absorbed and satisfied, and thus to tailor the gospel to its own beliefs.

This missionary mindset is quite distinct from evangelistic enthusiasm. Evangelism can be (and usually is) carried on within the constraints of a culture. For example, Jesus can be preached as satisfying modern desires for self-fulfillment. The missionary, however, sees the gospel as an invasive force, challenging culture, compelling a higher allegiance.

Since the time of Constantine, few Western Christians (including Western missionaries) have been able to look at their own societies that way. Christianity was identified with European culture (“Christian civilization”), which by definition could not be converted, since it already had been. More recently, modern Western culture offered truths to which Christianity was expected to conform. *Christianity* had to be converted, demythologized, or otherwise transformed to meet the requirements of Western culture.

What British Evangelicals Do Right

The highly effective (and visible) ministry of England's Evangelical Alliance. TOM SINE

“Promiscuity is genetic,” exclaimed the Anglican bishop of Edinburgh on British television. The BBC immediately contacted Clive Calver, general director of the Evangelical Alliance, for an evangelical response. Calver was clear and direct: “Perhaps there is also a rape gene and a murder gene. What are the societal consequences of such an unfounded claim? The Bible teaches that God has given us moral choice and we are responsible for our behavior.”

As he told me this story in his office, Calver sat forward suddenly, his dark eyes flashing. “We have to address an enormous range of issues, from euthanasia and the global arms trade to miracles and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. There has been a remarkable increase of interest in evangelical opinion in Britain in the last few years. This growing demand is, frankly, taxing me and the resources of the Evangelical Alliance to the absolute limits!”

The demands on the alliance will very likely increase in the coming years. How the EA is already handling these demands is instructive to American evangelicals.

EVANGELICALS WITH A DIFFERENCE

Like our British counterparts, American Christians want to influence our society. But in the United States, unlike Britain, an increasingly inflamed culture war is dividing both church and society. The church in America is often much more seriously divided by politics than theology.

One cannot be considered an evangelical Christian in many circles within the U.S. if one is not a conservative Republican. Nowhere else in the English-speaking West—Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, or Canada—does one have to be the equivalent of a conservative Republican to be considered a born-again Christian. This is a uniquely American phenomenon. When the British evangelicals do

Newbigin's years in India developed habits of mind that he used to rethink all that. In India he had engaged a powerful, religious world-view, as intellectually sophisticated as anything in Europe. Preaching in Tamil (a difficult language that few outsiders master), he had to think through the Christian doctrines in a language formed by Hindu thought, to people accustomed to a Hindu way of thinking. He learned to read a culture with a view to its transformation in Christ.

NAMING GOD

As a young missionary, Newbigin regularly visited a Hindu monastery, its great hall "lined with pictures of the great religious figures of history, among them Jesus. Each year, on Christmas Day, worship was offered before the picture of Jesus. It was obvious to me as an English Christian," says Newbigin, "that this was an example of syncretism. Jesus had simply been co-opted into the Hindu world-view; that view was in no way challenged. It was only slowly that I began to see that my own Christianity had this syncretistic character, that I too had to some degree co-opted Jesus into

the world-view of my culture." He saw this particularly when he studied the gospel accounts of evil spirits and realized that simple villagers understood them more readily than he.

The Hindu monastery belonged to the Ramakrishna Mission. In it Newbigin joined a weekly study group that read alternatively (in Sanskrit and Greek) from the Svetasvara Upanishad and John's gospel. One member was a scholar in the *visishtadvaita* philosophy, a theistic form of Hinduism with a very strong doctrine of sin and grace, memorialized by Rudolph Otto in *India's Religion of Grace and Christianity*. Newbigin "set himself to school" to learn this philosophy.

"There came a moment in my meetings with this scholar when he put to me the question, 'What do you mean by salvation?' [In answering] I emphasized sin and forgiveness in the work of Christ. When I finished, my teacher said, 'That's very interesting, because what you have said, apart from the name of Jesus, is exactly what I would have said.'

"So I said, 'In that case, tell me, what is the basis of your assurance that God does forgive your sins?'

"And without a moment's hesitation,

he said, 'If he wouldn't, I would go to a god who would.'

"I suddenly saw that . . . someone could use all the language of evangelical Christianity, and yet the center was fundamentally the self, my need of salvation. And God is auxiliary to that.

"Whereas for a Christian brought up on the Bible, the figure of God, Yahweh, this formidable, inescapable, masterly figure is so deeply engraved in our minds, that a Christian could never have said that. But it came straight off his lips, without a moment's hesitation. . . .

"I also saw that quite a lot of evangelical Christianity can easily slip, can become centered in me and my need of salvation, and not . . . in the glory of God.

"From that time on, in preaching in India, I never started by talking about sin and salvation, I talked about God and what he has done. . . .

"I remember once spending a whole day with a man from a very, very primitive hill tribe, which has never been touched by what we would call Hinduism, or by Christianity. He was a cave dweller. I spent the whole day with him, following him through the jungle as he used his bow and arrow to shoot little

get involved politically, it is usually in a nonpartisan and irenic manner.

The Evangelical Alliance is the largest Christian organization in Great Britain, representing 1.3 million Christians from 30 denominations and over 800 Christian organizations. The EA celebrated its 150th anniversary last month with an event to which 4,000 Christian leaders from Great Britain and elsewhere were invited.

THAT WAS THEN

It was a very different world when EA was founded in 1846. Queen Victoria was 27 years of age, and the potato famine was devastating Ireland. Originally the alliance was to become the first world alliance of evangelicals. At the organizing meeting, held in August 1846, evangelicals came from Britain, continental Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. However, when a representative from the Baptist Union proposed that slave holders be denied admission to membership, the American delegation protested, and the alliance fractured. Instead of a worldwide organization, they settled for a loosely linked network of national organizations not accountable to one another.

The initial emphasis of the Evangelical Alliance in Britain, still strong today, was religious liberty. In subsequent years, through tough times and good times, the alliance has emphasized prayer, the renewal of the church, and the advancement of the gospel. In 1951 EA joined with the National Association of Evangelicals in birthing

the World Evangelical Fellowship. The alliance was also instrumental in inviting Billy Graham to the historic Greater London Crusade of 1954.

Over the past 15 years the church in Britain has experienced remarkable renewal and outreach into British society. The alliance, under the unifying leadership of Clive Calver, has grown significantly during this time. When Calver took over in 1983, he and his team established a two-track strategy: (1) to develop greater credibility with the larger evangelical community in the U.K. and (2) to achieve visibility and credibility with the media and political leaders in Britain.

It succeeded in building trust with evangelicals by providing leadership in an area of key concern at that time, the influence of the occult in children's literature. EA also built bridges to the media, signaling that the archbishop of Canterbury and other Anglican leaders do not speak for all Christians in England. Over time, both the media and political leaders in Parliament were educated by the alliance about evangelical Christianity, its constituency, and views on religious, social, and political issues.



Clive Calver

rabbits and little animals. . . . I had a long talk with him, and one of the questions I put to him was, 'Who do you think made us?' Immediately he said *Kadavul*, which is one of the words for God, but it is a very basic word that is a combination of the verbal root *kada*, which means to go beyond, to transcend, and *ul*, which is the word for meaning or for being. . . . So *Kadavul* is 'The Transcendent Being.' It's a wonderful word for God.

"When I preach in a village where Christianity is not known, and where the name of Jesus is not known . . . I have to begin by using the word *Kadavul*. But of course when I use the word *Kadavul* they're thinking of Vishnu or Shiva or some other Hindu God. I know that, but I can't help it. It's only when I begin to tell the stories of what God has done that they begin to say, '*Kadavul* is not what we had thought.'"

In a sense, these Indian experiences form the basis of Newbigin's approach to the modern West. "Truth," Newbigin says, "is not abstract ideas or mystical experiences, but a story of what God has done." This is no less true in the West, where ordinary people have lost hold of the gospel story that fills

God with a Christian meaning. A bold proclamation of the Bible story, especially of the historical life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, make up the central authority for Christian preaching, East or West. For Newbigin, all other apologetics take a subsidiary role. "If someone says, 'Newbigin says it's all a matter of faith, that means Newbigin is ultimately a relativist,' my answer is, there is no stronger way of affirming a statement than to say I will gladly die for it."

WANTED: BELIEVING CONGREGATIONS

That last statement catches the tip of something important. Newbigin's writings give more than missionary thinking. He communicates blue fire. His words make a credo, a marching song. It is a spirit almost lost among modern Christians, who are (as Newbigin notes) so pleased that the church is now multicultural but so embarrassed by the method by which it came to be so.

Unlike many Christian leaders, Newbigin was never for any great length of time an academic, a church bureaucrat, or (never at all) a media savant. He has, however, done a great deal of street

preaching before skeptical crowds. As a bishop in India, he set his priority on congregational ministry, traveling out to remote, illiterate villages, spending the night in local homes, conducting services in the open air. He could get on the next plane for Geneva to parley with great theologians. (Beginning in 1952, for example, he chaired the "Committee of Twenty Five," an assemblage of feisty theologians, including Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr, leading them in drafting a statement on Christian hope.) Yet he came back to engage insistently the life of the church at a congregational level, just as he would do decades later at Winson Green after his retirement.

Newbigin would not subscribe to the most conservative of evangelical definitions of scriptural authority, but he is a biblical Christian from head to toe. As a searching, agnostic university student, Newbigin asked a friend how he would begin if he wanted to become a Christian. "Buy an alarm clock," was the answer.

"I didn't know whether there was a god or not, but I began taking just half an hour before breakfast to read the Bible and to pray." He has been doing

By 1988 the alliance had turned the corner. Members of the media began routinely to contact EA for its views on a broad range of issues. And the alliance became highly respected because it was nonpartisan, and it always did a thorough job of researching issues for its theological and public-policy implications.

AIMS AND MEANS

The objectives of the Evangelical Alliance today are straightforward:

- to promote unity in the church;
- to stimulate prayer;
- to encourage evangelism; and
- to enable Christians to act as salt and light in society.

One way EA seeks to achieve these goals is to sponsor an annual event called Spring Harvest. This yearly conference attracts evangelicals from house churches, and Baptist, Methodist, and Anglican congregations, along with Pentecostals, charismatics, and many ethnic congregations. Worship and prayer are the vital core of Spring Harvest. But there is an educational component as well: leading evangelical scholars from the U.K. and beyond are tapped to educate evangelicals on the history, theology, and social implications of their faith.

This year the theme of Spring Harvest was "Faith Beyond Belief." Over 20,000 people participated at two

different sites. During one week more than £100,000 was raised to support evangelical missions.

THIS IS NOW

Calver, writing on the evangelical renewal in Britain during the last 15 years, says: "Fresh styles of worship, an acceleration of church planting and new commitment to social responsibility have played their part in producing numerical increase among evangelicals in all denominations. As evangelicals have begun to depart from an inherited policy of self-imposed isolation, they have emerged from their comfortable ghettos to grapple with the needs of contemporary society."

Addressing a Christian leadership conference in Birmingham in 1995, Calver declared, "I challenge Christians in Birmingham to get out of their church building and address the urgent and growing needs in their community." To which a man from the audience named Cameron responded later: "I work with single-parent mums and I find them very responsive to the gospel of Christ. The only problem is that I have difficulty locating churches in our city willing to get involved in working with single parents and their kids."

By the end of this EA-sponsored event, I had witnessed a very gratifying response to Calver's challenge. A number of pastors and church leaders gathered with Cameron and arranged to visit his ministry; others who presented urban mission opportunities were also inundated by interested persons.

so ever since. "I do most deeply believe (and I have tried to act on that belief in many different situations) that when we are looking for guidance and renewal, fundamentally we have to go to the Scriptures" (*Word in Season*).

His conversion came later that year, when he helped run a holiday camp for unemployed miners in South Wales. The camp, resolutely secular, seemed to have little to offer such destitute men. One night they got roaring drunk and fought each other. Young and idealistic, Newbigin was shattered. That night in his tent he had a vision of a cross, "spanning the space between heaven and earth." It seemed to promise hope from God, reaching into the most dire circumstances. "I was sure that night, in a way I never had been before, that this was the clue that I must follow if I were to make any kind of sense of the world" (*Unfinished Agenda*). In another year he had committed his life to Christian ministry.

As a young Christian, Newbigin was nourished by the Student Christian Movement, an organization in the universities that then had an intensely evangelistic and missionary ethos. (After graduation he spent several years as an SCM

“ It is less important to ask a Christian what he or she believes about the Bible than it is to inquire what he or she does with it.” (*Proper Confidence*)

staff worker, as did his wife-to-be, Helen.) He took the Student Volunteer Movement's pledge, "It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary." The SVM slogan, "The Evangelization of the World in This Generation," still had currency.

In seminary, he studied under John Oman, a disciple of Schleiermacher and his program of accommodating the gospel to the "cultured despiser." Yet an intense study of Romans over one vacation period convinced Newbigin of "the centrality and objectivity of the atonement accomplished on Calvary. . . . At the end of the exercise I was much more of an evangelical than a liberal" (*Unfinished Agenda*). He has never wavered from that orthodox understanding of the gospel.

The Bible, the Cross, the Atonement, the evangelization of the world: put them together and you have the makings of missionary fervor. It may seem some distance from this to Newbigin's learned disquisitions on the epistemology of science or on the impact of Enlightenment thinking. Really it is not, for two reasons. One is that missionaries—especially pioneer missionaries—have often been keen explorers and analysts of the culture they enter, of its languages and customs, of the points at which it is most open (and most resistant) to the gospel. Newbigin certainly represents the type, both in India and in England.

The second reason is that Western thinking—the "acids of modernity"—have seeped everywhere around the world. Young people assume Western

ACTIVISM WITH AN ENGLISH ACCENT

When Sir Fred Catherwood resigned his position as the vice president of the European Parliament, he was invited to become the president of the Evangelical Alliance. He said he would accept the position on one condition: if he could spearhead an Evangelical Social Action Network in Britain to expand and coordinate Christian outreach to those at the margins.

In his autobiography, Lord Catherwood says: "I believe we need to get together in all the major cities to form Christian action networks so that anyone in need can look to a church and be directed to help somewhere in the network."

When the alliance's network was publicly launched, it was welcomed by city leaders and covered by the mass media.

The Salvation Army, Scripture Union, Oasis Charitable Trust, and many churches were reaching out to drug addicts, homeless, and unemployed people long before EA ever started these new networks. But under Catherwood's able leadership the social action networks seem to be doing a more effective job of coordinating and expanding this area of witness and service. Already social action networks are established in London, Nottingham, Sheffield, Bristol, and Worcester.

One success story involves Tracy, who lives in a part of Liverpool with a very high rate of unemployment. Like many of her peers, Tracy had not been able to find a job after

she graduated from high school three years earlier. She lacked self-confidence and became withdrawn. When some Christians, concerned about growing unemployment in Liverpool, started a ministry called "Training into Jobs," they got in touch with Tracy. They gave her job training, which boosted her self-esteem. As a consequence of their efforts, an important transformation has taken place in Tracy's life. First they helped her get a job. She has now worked two years in the hotel industry. Most important, because of their care Tracy has committed her life to Jesus Christ. She has become fully involved in a local church and has developed enough confidence to lead a women's group in her congregation.

Tracy is only one of over 2,000 people in Liverpool that Training into Jobs has trained and placed. Of these, 12 percent have found, like Tracy, a vital Christian faith.

When the alliance seeks to be salt and light, it enters the public arena as an agent of reconciliation. It repudiates partisan, ideological, and adversarial politics.

Calver wrote me that "The rise of the religious right . . . has caused grave concern here in the U.K. We have long sought to develop a partnership between those on the right and left of evangelicals . . . in fact our Chancellor of the Exchequer, Right Honorable Kenneth Clark, once commented to me: 'Clive, one minute you are talking to me about social issues, the next moment on moral ones. What are you evangelicals? Are you right wing or left wing?' My answer was that we are both!"

“The missionary action of the Church is the exegesis of the gospel. (*Truth to Tell*)

ways in Bangkok and Rio de Janeiro, in Jakarta and Banjul. A missionary cannot afford simply to understand traditional culture. He or she must comprehend modern urban, mass-media culture. “If one is looking at the total situation of Christianity in the contemporary world, addressing European culture is the most urgent question, and for two reasons: first because it is modern, post-Enlightenment Western culture that, in the guise of ‘modernization,’ is replacing more traditional cultures all over the world, and second because . . . this culture has a unique power to erode and neutralize the Christian faith” (*Word in Season*).

Like any real missionary, though, Newbigin’s fundamental concern is not to analyze the situation correctly. It is to raise up believing congregations. Thus

the drumbeat of confession sounds in all his work. “How can this strange story of God made man, of a crucified savior, of resurrection and new creation become credible for those whose entire mental training has conditioned them to believe that the real world is the world that can be satisfactorily explained and managed without the hypothesis of God? I know of only one clue to the answering of that question, only one real hermeneutic of the gospel: congregations that believe it” (*Word in Season*).

PROPER CONFIDENCE IN THE GOSPEL

Selly Oak Colleges’ President Martin Conway remembers an occasion when a group of visiting Indian Christians learned that Lesslie Newbigin once lived at the colleges. “Where?” they asked, and

when they were shown the modest home, immediately lined up in front of it to have their pictures taken.

That does not happen with many missionaries. Such a reputation comes not from intellectual brilliance, nor from missionary fervor. It is bred by character remembered with love. In India, Newbigin met regularly with pastors and other church leaders, teaching the Bible to them, praying with them, visiting in their homes.

In his postretirement career, Newbigin has had less opportunity to make such a personal impact. Most people encounter him through his books or through a lecture, and in either case, they are not likely to learn much about him personally. He is too much an old-fashioned English gentleman to share personal experiences with an audience. (Though he has lived the kind of intellectually rich life that might, in fact, lend itself to illuminating his analysis.)

Today, at the age of 87, almost blind because of macular degeneration, Newbigin and his wife live in a group home for the elderly in London, occupying two very ordinary rooms. It is not the setting one expects for an influential

British evangelicals believe the gospel transcends traditional political categories. They are also working with a broader array of issues than many evangelicals in the U.S. Concerned about abortion and other family issues, they also engage world hunger, the environment, human rights, religious liberty, racism, the disabled and the poor, Sunday trading laws, and violence in videos.

The Evangelical Alliance seeks to be a prophetic witness for the gospel from outside the political order. It also insists on a scriptural foundation for public-policy advocacy. As a result, EA has joined conservatives to lobby Parliament to protect children from access to adult videos, and it has joined progressives in lobbying for greater government assistance for the disabled. Since it seeks to define its position from Scripture and conscience rather than from political ideology, it is respected on both sides of the political aisle in Parliament.

Evangelical scholarship is taken seriously by the alliance. Its sense of social responsibility is shaped by persons like Lesslie Newbigin and John Stott and thought leaders from outside England. The serious attention to evangelical scholarship may explain in part why the focus of the Evangelical Alliance is broad, its style conciliatory, and its use of Scripture foundational.

QUID PRO QUO?

Although American evangelicals have much to learn from the Evangelical Alliance, we cannot appropriate its models

completely. Our journeys are so different. Britain is an island nation in which established faith and established government are inseparably linked. As a consequence, the British media see a link between Christian faith and politics. America, on the other hand, is a frontier nation that has sought to create a pluralistic society in which we separate church from state.

Nevertheless, British evangelicals regularly borrow from America. Models of church growth like Willow Creek Community Church, urban outreach like John Perkins’s work in community development, and charismatic renewal like the Vineyard have influenced the ministries of British evangelicals.

American evangelicals could best join in celebrating the Evangelical Alliance’s 150th anniversary by learning from it, especially its approach to public witness. Should we not allow Scripture to move us beyond partisan politics and ideology as we work for the common good? Couldn’t we be reminded by the alliance that the primary way the Bible teaches that God changes society is not through politics but by proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel of Jesus Christ? Can’t we learn from these evangelicals with a difference? CI

Tom Sine is author of Cease Fire: Searching for Sanity in America’s Culture Wars (Eerdmans, 1995), from which some of the material for this article was drawn. Cease Fire was included in CT’s top 25 Books of the Year for 1996.

bishop, yet he seems to find great pleasure in it. Showing the garden (which he has had to abandon caring for, because he cannot see the plants), Newbigin exclaims on his good fortune to have such a lovely place. He treats with gracious courtesy the others who share the house, though as one young friend, Jenny Taylor, points out, many of them cannot hear what he says, and he is too blind to detect when they cannot.

Retired now from parish ministry, he still keeps up an active schedule, lecturing and writing. Besides that, he makes a career of encouraging others, often younger people, usually in quiet, behind-the-scene ways. He does not act like a great man. In fact, it is not entirely clear that he realizes he is a great man. If he does, he does not seem to consider it important.

Newbigin's first audience was among mostly liberal Christians, but in the past year he has lectured repeatedly at Holy Trinity Brompton, the Anglican church that is London headquarters for the charismatic Toronto Blessing. It seems an unlikely match, but he has come away with a deep thankfulness for what he has seen in that church. He has not spoken in tongues, he says, but (with a twinkle in his eye) he tells how he has learned to lift his hands in prayer.

So near the end of his life, this man, who has struggled for church unity all his adult life, emerges as one of the very few theological thinkers who can speak to all poles of Protestantism: the liberal, the evangelical, the charismatic. (He has the ear of many Catholics as well.)

He does this without sacrificing a bit of boldness. Newbigin says that he does not relish an argument, but over his lifetime he has launched himself into any number of desperate ones. Not everyone loves him, for he can use English to hit error like a hammer. Yet he behaves with such humility that even those who disagree must admire him.

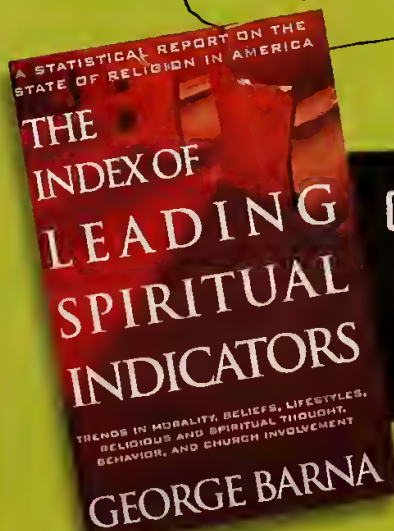
"I have felt that my main ministry," Newbigin says, "was just to encourage ministers and pastors and clergy to be more confident in preaching the gospel. What I have been so horrified by is a kind of timidity by Christian preachers and ministers. The kind of attitude that says, 'Well, I happen to be a Christian, but of course I wouldn't expect you to think that.'" Lesslie Newbigin is helping Western Christians to regain their missionary nerve, to preach the gospel not only to the ends of the earth, but also in those hostile climates closest to home. CT

Making the Gospel Public: *Recent books by Lesslie Newbigin.*

- *The Open Secret: Sketches for a Missionary Theology* (Eerdmans, 1978). A summary of Newbigin's approach to Christian missions.
- *The Other Side of 1984: Questions for the Churches* (WCC Publications, 1983). The seminal book for the gospel and culture movement.
- *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography* (Eerdmans, 1985; updated version, St. Andrew Press, 1993). The story of a remarkable life, told by the one who lived it.
- *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Eerdmans, 1986). An expansion of *The Other Side of 1984*, based on his 1984 Warfield Lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary. Newbigin outlines the main contours of modern culture, exploring the idea of the gospel as public truth and its implications for contemporary culture.
- *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989). A much more detailed volume on how the Christian gospel relates to a society marked by religious pluralism, ethnic diversity, and cultural relativism.
- *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Eerdmans, 1991). A rejection of the idea that the gospel is merely a matter of private opinions or personal values. Newbigin reasserts the objective, historical truth of the gospel and argues that the public life of Western culture must be evaluated in its light.
- *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Eerdmans, 1995). A continued attack on Enlightenment assumptions about knowledge and their impact upon the churches.
- *Truth and Authority in Modernity* (Trinity Press International, 1996). Appearing in the "Christian Mission and Modern Culture" series, this brief book asks how the church can speak with authority in a culture that is suspicious of all claims to authority. CT

By Lawrence Osborn, Cambridge, England, author of *Restoring the Vision: The Gospel and Modern Culture* (Mowbray, 1995).

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